

OPINION

The easing of COVID-19 public health measures can't be a free-for-all

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A person walks past closed businesses on Spadina Avenue in Chinatown in Toronto on May 13, 2021.

NATHAN DENETTE/THE CANADIAN PRESS

“Hope is here.”

Quebec Premier François Legault was downright giddy as he unveiled the province’s “deconfinement” plan last week. (Fourteen months into the pandemic, the past four-plus under curfew, the French word “déconfinement” seems much more apropos than the blander English descriptor “reopening.”)

A few days later, Ontario Premier Doug Ford announced a similar plan, but in a more sober, smile-free manner. In Ontario, it really is a reopening, because there never was a confinement.

“We all want to open up a lot sooner. But we can’t. We have to be cautious,” was the most enthusiasm Mr. Ford could muster.

Other than tone, the roadmaps back to normality are similar in Canada’s two biggest provinces, with gradual and prudent easing of restrictions on outdoor activities in coming days, allowing things such as outdoor dining and in-person gatherings in mid-June, then a one-dose summer of camps and backyard BBQs, culminating with the potential for easing masking and physical distancing rules in August.

More importantly, both are tying the untethering of the public to vaccination – specifically getting at least 75 per cent of the adult population vaccinated with at least one dose before the end of August.

We need to reward people for months and months of sacrifice, and vaccination is the golden (or at least gold-plated) ticket.

What both these plans say, in broad strokes, is that the more and faster people get a COVID-19 vaccine, the more freedom and fun they can have.

The big difference between the provinces is that Quebec is using a clear timetable, while Ontario is using a metric; in the former, restrictions will be eased on specific dates, while in the latter, the easing will only happen if a set percentage of the population is vaccinated.

Quebec’s approach has the advantage of being much more clear. Locked-down residents of Montreal, for example, can lick their lips in anticipation of curfew being lifted on May 28 and even the prospect of fans attending a Canadiens-Leafs hockey game live on May 29.

Ontario will lift its less-strict stay-at-home order June 2, but will only allow outdoor dining and reopening stores when at least 60 per cent of the adult population has had one dose of

vaccine. (It's 58.5 per cent now, so June 14 is the target.) Then the timing of the gradual, three-step reopening gets more vague.

Mr. Legault told Quebecers that "summer rhymes with party" (and it does in French), but stressed that the summer gatherings need to be small and restrained.

That, of course, is the big unknown. When people get a taste of post-COVID life, will they be able to restrain themselves?

You can bet there will soon be photos and videos on the news of some small-scale debauchery, likely groups of young people dancing and partying.

We can take comfort in knowing that these little bursts of overenthusiasm don't much matter, especially if they take place outdoors.

A greater worry is if the mainstream mindset becomes that "it's over," and people return to home visits, office work and gatherings incautiously.

A fourth wave is not out of the question. In fact, it's likely if we make the mistake of abandoning public-health measures rather than easing out of them.

Vaccination is important, but it's not magic.

Both the Quebec and Ontario strategies are based on having 75 per cent of the population get one dose of vaccine. But that's an arbitrary number. It's certainly not a guarantee of much vaunted "herd immunity," even if that is achievable.

As we put our faith in vaccination to bring down infections and deaths, we also have to recognize that testing and contact tracing became all the more important.

In recent weeks, testing numbers have plummeted. Contact tracing – tracking the contacts of those who test positive for COVID-19 – was part of our daily vernacular early in the pandemic, but it's almost been forgotten.

The only way to avoid a resurgence of cases is to stop the virus circulating in the community: test, trace, isolate aggressively.

The missing piece of the deconfinement plans in both provinces was a commitment to slam the door shut if case numbers do jump again. Yet, if there is an overarching lesson of the

pandemic, it's that: To counter the spread of a wily virus, you have to shut down swiftly and reopen slowly.

Yes, hope is here.

But if we want to remain hopeful, and on track to post-COVID freedom, we have to be willing and ready to adjust our metrics and timetables, and curb our enthusiasm.

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